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ABSTRACT

Early Childhood Education Programs are an integral and accepted part of the education of almost all American Indian children in Canada, with one or more programs being available on most reserves. Most of the programs were organized at the request of parents and local school committees. Nursery School or K1 Programs involve 4-year-olds. In many areas these are separate programs and, in some cases, the only educational program available. Some small communities offer a combined program for 4- and 5-year-olds to make the operation of a program feasible. Kindergarten or K2 Programs for 5-year-olds are established on many reserves. All programs have a very low adult-child ratio of between 1 to 6 and 1 to 10, which provides maximum attention for each child. All programs meet the children's need: not to live apart from their parents and family; to feel secure and loved; to be safe, protected against physical, moral and social hazards; to be active in exploring and moving about freely, using the senses in experimenting with various things; to develop means of communication through language, art, music, science, and other fields; to feel pride in their own achievements; to play, have adequate recreation, and enjoy life. Intended to provide the reader with an understanding of the philosophy of preschool Indian education in Canada, this publication describes the program, its purpose and scope; discusses the roles of parents, teachers, and the community; and discusses training programs for preschool workers. (NQ)

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Indian and Eskimo Affairs Program
Education

Nistum ā Kesikak
The First Day

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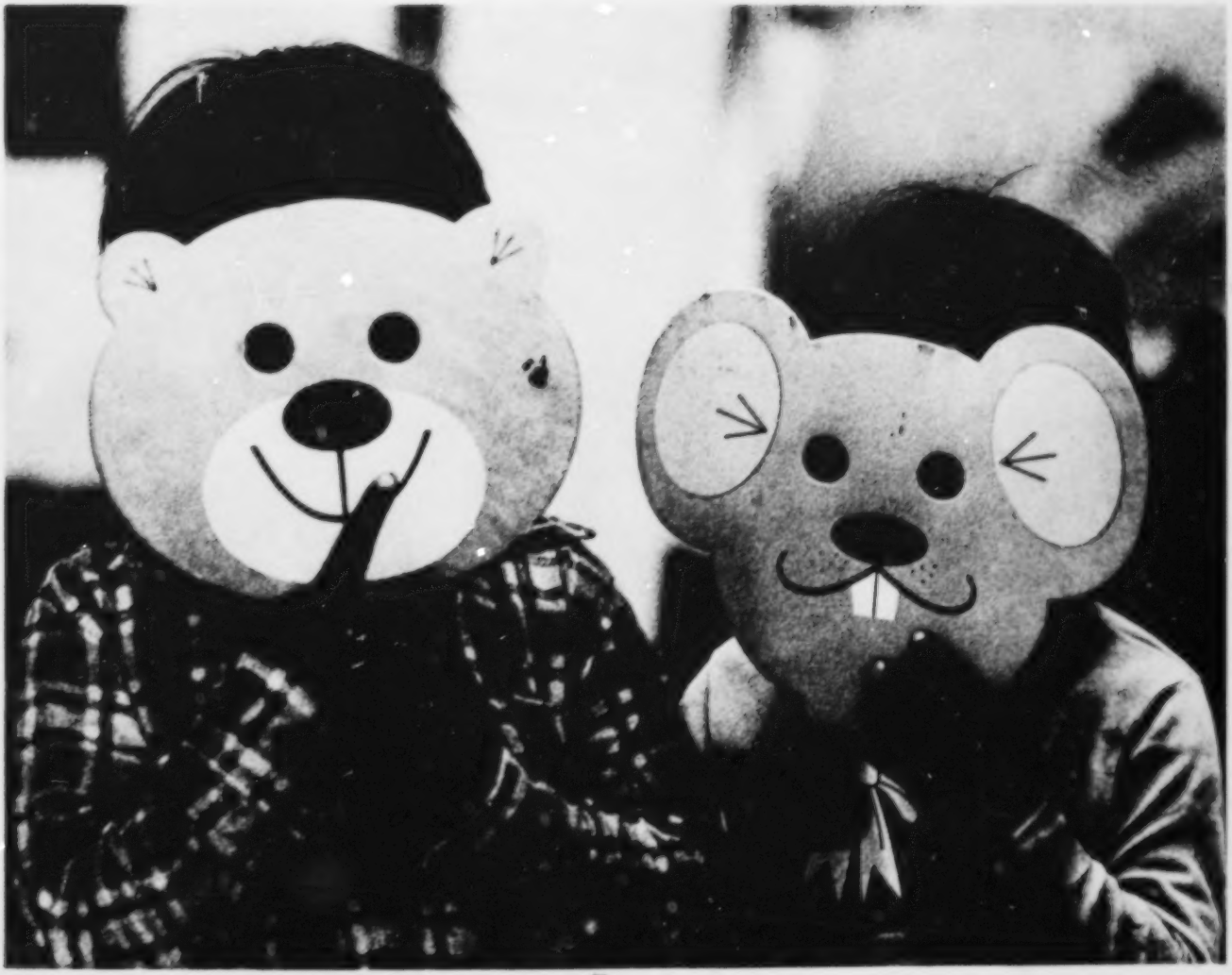
The nature of the child must determine all the details of his education, and an educational institution must be so organized as to afford room for adaptation to the inclination and needs of the individual pupil.

Pestalozzi



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Preface

Nistum ā kesikak:
Cree words meaning *The First Day.*

This publication is intended to provide the reader with an understanding of the philosophy of preschool Indian education in Canada. It describes the program, its purposes and its scope. It also emphasizes the importance of treating each child as an individual.

It is hoped that *Nistum ā kesikak* will create a greater awareness and understanding of the importance of the first few years of school.

The text was written by Norah Lewis, Classroom Consultant for the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, British Columbia Region. The photographs are the work of Frederik Stevenson, free-lance photographer, Ottawa, and were taken at kindergartens attended by Indian children in various locations across Canada.

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Preschool Education

Early Childhood Education Programs are now an integral and accepted part of the education of almost all Indian children in Canada with one or more programs being available on most reserves. A few preschool programs began at the instigation of the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development; however, most programs were organized at the request of parents and local school committees. Most preschools on reserves have been in operation for about six to ten years, and were organized and operated as part of the regular Federal School Program before many of the provincial school systems recognized the advantages of preschool education. How far-sighted Indian parents were in recognizing the needs of their children and the advantages of an early childhood program!

Nursery School

Nursery School or KI Programs involve four-year-olds. In many areas these are separate programs and, in some cases, the only educational program available. Some small communities offer a combined program for four- and five-year-olds to make the operation of a program feasible.

Teachers always comment on the amazing amount of intellectual, social

and emotional growth of these young children in their play-oriented program. Where these programs have been established, parents are anxious to have them continue.

Kindergarten

Kindergarten or K2 Programs for five-year-olds are established on many reserves. Some programs are operating in beautifully constructed buildings specifically designed for young children, while others are held in converted classrooms or church halls. Fortunately the success of a program depends not upon classroom facilities, but rather on the skill of the staff and parent participation.

All programs have a very low adult-child ratio of between one to six and one to ten, which provides maximum attention for each child.

Most programs operate for a half-day, five days a week. There are some full-day programs and some partial-week programs but variation depends on the number and age of the children and staff availability.

In many schools preschool is part of the total school program and the young children are part of the larger student body. However, with the establishment of an increasing number of preschools on reserves, there are many situations where the nursery school and/or kindergarten is the only educational facility available within the Indian community. On completion of the preschool program, the children move into joint or integrated schools in nearby towns or communities.

Many of the preschools on reserves are operated by the Band Councils or School Committees. Funds are provided by the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, but the teaching staff is usually composed of local Indian people who are enrolled in training programs organized in their region. In some early childhood education programs, local Indian assistants or aides work with qualified teachers. They are an important part of the teaching team, and provide the children with a familiar presence and a voice that speaks their language.

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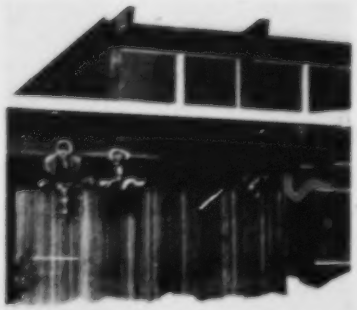

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Preschools are for Children

The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) Executive Board[4], in giving attention to the importance of specific programs for young children, stresses that all programs for children should meet the following fundamental needs:

- *The need during years of dependency* ***not to live apart*** *from their parents and family.*

Bringing her child to school to register enables a mother to look around the classroom her child will attend. By taking her child into the classroom and exploring together some of the materials, both mother and child acquire a knowledge of the environment in which the child will function and the adults with whom the child will relate.

"Mother is here as long as you need her." Encouraging the mother to remain in the classroom until her child feels she is no longer needed, makes going to class a less fearful experience for the child and less traumatic for the mother as she sees her child fit into the activities of the school.

Many schools register only a few children each day, over a period of several days, when school opens in the fall. Staggered enrolment creates a smoother beginning for children and teachers and enables each child to adjust to a small group and to the classroom situation before meeting the whole group. The staff benefits also by not being confronted by a large group with no previous school experience.

Many of the instructors, assistants and aides are mothers, grandmothers or aunts of the children. The child feels comfortable having that special adult present who speaks his language and understands his ways.

Parents are welcomed and encouraged to visit the classrooms. It is essential that they be knowledgeable about what is happening to their child in the classroom and also that they be involved in their child's education. Some parents bring special talents or skills to the classroom. How proud a child feels when father demonstrates carvings or mother makes cookies with the class. By taking home their paintings and drawings the children also

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share their classroom experiences with their parents. In turn, the parents are proud of their child's developing skills and progress.

- *The need* ***to feel secure*** *and loved, to be accepted and respected as individuals so that they can develop to their fullest capacity intellectually, emotionally and spiritually.*

Attendance is not mandatory, yet the percentage of attendance in all preschools is very high as the children want to go to school.

Children are greeted as they arrive, talked to and given help with removing their coats and boots. *"Somebody cares that I come. I feel good about this place."* An adult takes the time to listen to the child's ideas and to talk with him. The low adult-pupil ratio allows each child to receive individual attention several times a day.

The setting and maintaining of limits assure the child that he or she is respected, loved and cared for. The only limits set are those which are essential to protect and support the child and the group. Discipline, which is simply a matter of teaching the child to accept limits, is not a problem among children who have an adequate, balanced program where the materials are carefully selected, the equipment is functionally arranged, and there is adequate supervision and guidance. The emphasis is on a warm supportive atmosphere where the children are accepted for what they are, where they are encouraged and praised for what they can do. Excessive demands which are beyond the physical, emotional, intellectual or

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social development of the child have no place in the classroom.

Sharing with other children and sharing with adults is part of the socialization process. *"I'm certain you enjoyed making that picture. Do you feel good about your work?"* By avoiding a value judgement of the child's work and accepting both the child and his work as important, the child is made to feel respected and worthy.

- *The need* ***to be safe,*** *that is, to be protected against physical, moral and social hazards; to develop their health potentials, and to be provided with safeguards against disease and illness.*

Travel to and from school is by many modes but always by a method which assures parents of the safety of their children. Some walk to school, some come by bus, others come by boat. Winter brings forms of travel that are unknown in summer such as horse-drawn sleighs or snowmobiles.

Weather and problems in busing create the greatest number of absences. In some homes, young children are so anxious to come to school that they get themselves up, dressed and ready. Such determination must be appreciated by the staff.

At the school, there are compassionate adults to apply bandages and sympathy to bumps and bruises. First aid training is an essential part of the training of preschool workers.

Snack time is not only a time to revive dwindling energy, but a time to relax, to socialize and enjoy the company of others. It is a time to exchange and interchange ideas and a time to develop social skills in talking and listening. Some children receive the Department-issued milk and biscuits, while others bring an orange, apple or a sandwich for a snack. A limited number of schools provide a lunch program for the children.

While the teaching staff do their best to provide safety for the children, they also encourage the child to learn to protect himself by establishing basic health habits such as hand washing,

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tooth brushing, covering coughs and sneezes and keeping everything but food out of the mouth. Child-sized equipment and facilities are of great value in making a health program possible.

- *The need* ***to be active*** *in exploring and to move about freely, using the senses in experimenting with a variety of things.*

The senses are the avenues to learning and all senses are used to explore and experience the world. The child begins to understand his world by hearing, seeing, tasting, touching and smelling his way. By recognizing this natural interest, curiosity, and activity, the program is designed to utilize the sensory avenues for learning, both indoors and out-of-doors.

Piaget's[2] observation that intelligence emerges as it is nurtured and grows as the child has things to act upon has led teachers to provide rich sensory experience as the underlying base for abstract concepts.

As the child progresses through each stage of development, the possibility of acquiring new abilities and new ways of assimilating information is opened. Unless new knowledge and new skills are utilized they will not become a base on which the child can build.

Rich and varied sensory experiences in the early years provide a solid foundation for the subsequent development of facility in symbolic manipulation of ideas and concepts. It is through imaginative play and exploration, using the senses in an exploratory and constructive way, that the child meets and solves problems which require reasoning skills. With exploratory and experimental play comes the growth of language. Language makes

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play more imaginative, more constructive and a greater guide to reasoning. Experiences encourage communication and at this point there must be someone in his world with whom the child can communicate.

Children must explore the out-of-doors as well as the indoor environment under the guidance of their teachers. The marine life of the beach, the natural life of the lake shore, the texture of the snow, the feel of the wind and the smell of new houses under construction, are experiences which are as essential to the child's concept development as the painting, block-building and story-telling that take place inside the classroom.

- *The need* ***to develop means of communication*** *through language, art, music, science and other fields.*

A language program can only begin with the children themselves and preferably within a stimulating environment. There should be people to talk to, things to manipulate and experiences to share.

In classrooms where English is the language spoken by the children, communication is in English. There are other classrooms where the instruction is given in the native tongue by native teachers or the classroom assistants. The young children are always eager participants in these language programs and in many classrooms the major portion of the preschool program is conducted in the native tongue, an indication of the flexibility of the preschool program.

Language is learned not only through first hand experience but through shared books, films, filmstrips and pictures. The sharing of all experiences provides for the development of both receptive and expressive language.

Art provides every child with an opportunity to express himself in his own unique way in the medium in which he feels most comfortable. The child's art expresses the world as he sees it and as he reacts to it. Art, as a form of

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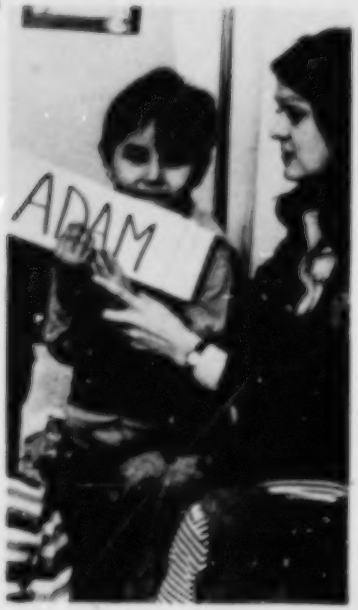

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self-expression, provides joy and satisfaction to the child, and may be easel-, finger- or print-painting, collages, clay work or just working with beautiful junk.

Small children delight in music and rhythm. They sing, they hum, they create their own tunes and lyrics. Children express rhythm in many activities as they work and play, not only with musical instruments, but with sticks, toys and blocks. Total body movement of dancing, marching, galloping or running is a natural expression of feeling and is encouraged through the response to sound or inner emotions of joy and happiness. The better the child's body co-ordination and spatial awareness, the better the prospects for developing perception of forms and symbols.

Observation, experimentation and testing of knowledge through first hand experiences and exploration, is

a part of the preschool science program. Preparing or selecting the environment in which the child is to observe and discover is the duty of the staff. Making discoveries is the child's duty and when it is done independently it is much more exciting and much better remembered.

The preschool child is not yet ready to write but is able to dictate letters, stories and adventures to an adult. Encouragement by the teacher assists the children to organize their thoughts and orally express their meanings. The teacher, through such a process, is made aware of the extent of the children's vocabulary, their grammatical skill and their ability to verbalize abstract concepts.

- *The need* ***to feel pride in their own achievements****, to gain independence, to develop self-confidence, to learn how to handle problems with increasing competence and to learn gradually how to deal with human relationships and to take responsibility.*

The concept the children have of themselves is probably the greatest single factor in the development of the child intellectually, socially, emotionally and spiritually. This self-concept is developed through interaction with the environment and also with individuals within the environment. Every child needs someone to believe in him and everyone who works with young children must be accepting, loving and supportive to every child in the classroom. Early personal relationships and interrelationships need to be very positive experiences. The teacher is often the first adult with whom the child associates outside his family group. *"She thinks I'm great. She likes me, and I like her."* It is essential that this child-adult relationship be a trust relationship for it can determine the child's permanent attitude toward school and teachers.

Discussion time is not only a time for sharing information, solving problems or planning together, but also a time when children learn to relate to others. They learn what is acceptable and not acceptable to the group. They learn how the group feels about them as individuals and also the expectations the group has of them. They also become aware of their own responsibility to the group. Learning to share is not always easy, but a helpful adult can assist the children to work out situations so they are able to help others and, in turn, be accepted by the group. The child then feels worthy and

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competent, not only as an individual but as a group member.

Pride in racial background and knowledge of the Indian people is enhanced through programs which stress the Indian heritage. These programs must not be just a token acceptance of the child's racial origin, but an appreciation of the values and traditions of the Indian people which still remain within the group. Contributions made by Indians to the literature, music, art, names, language, tools, equipment and political history of Canada must be presented very positively. The preschool classroom is not the place for cultural conflict. It is, instead, a place where the child can develop a positive self-image and a feeling of self-worth

Cultural programs, which have been developed by local Indian curriculum committees, are carried out in many schools and, in most cases, are taught by local Indian people. These programs are in addition to the numerous language programs in preschools.

- *The need **to play** and to have adequate recreation and **to enjoy life**; to have suitable experiences to stimulate emerging interests and to help clarify concepts of the world about them; to enjoy spontaneous laughter, gaiety and humour which are natural and acceptable in childhood.*

Play is children's work. Through play, they learn to know, deal with and master their environment. Through play, they create many situations in which they can observe, reason and solve problems. Hartley *et al*[3] list eight functions served by play: to imitate adults, to play out real life roles in an intense way, to reflect relationships and experiences, to express pressing needs, to release unacceptable impulses, to reverse roles usually taken, to mirror growth, to work out problems and experiment with solutions. As the children play they verbalize their actions and so increase their own understanding.

Most classrooms are arranged with a variety of learning-activity centres. These provide challenges to meet the needs and interests of each child. Children are able to progress at their own rate of development and solve their own problems. Activity centres provide opportunity for concrete experiences, language learning and socialization. They are developed around such things as climbing apparatus, blocks, puzzles, small manipulative materials, work benches, sound tables and water play equipment. There may also be library corners, audio-visual corners, housekeeping corners and art corners.

Each activity centre develops a variety of skills. Some stress large muscle – others small muscle – coordination; in some, dramatic play,

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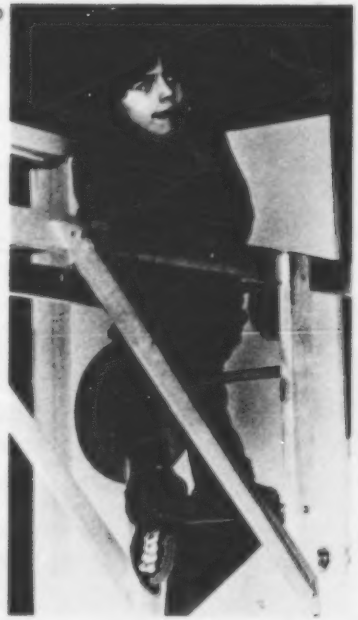

dramatization or creativity is important; while in others it is socialization and co-operation. The library corner provides a variety of books and a quiet place to manipulate pages. The corner also provides the opportunity to develop eye-hand co-ordination, and is a place for physical and emotional release and social growth through sharing.

Many teachers schedule cooking classes, and the making of popcorn, cookies, or apple sauce provides a delightful aroma along with opportunity for the children to measure, to observe, to taste, to smell, to touch and to share.

Outdoor play is essential for children as they need vigorous activity in a large space to develop motor skills and muscular co-ordination. They require space to function as they become accustomed to other children, materials and equipment. While some commercial playground equipment is desirable, adventure playgrounds with logs and rocks can be even more stimulating. Supervision by the staff enforces the limits in regard to equipment use and provides a knowledgeable adult with whom the child can converse. Outdoor play is an aspect of preschool education that is sometimes sadly neglected with reasons ranging from *"cold weather"* to the belief that *"learning only occurs inside the classroom."*

Fortunately, most teachers appreciate the value of learning in a well-prepared environment. An environment which provides for both individual and group activities a choice of interests and a variety of equipment to meet individual interests and needs will also allow the children to use their own ingenuity and creativity. The teacher's guidance is needed to assure the continued physical, social, emotional and intellectual growth of the child.

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Preschools are for Parents

Parents have the right and the responsibility to know what the school is doing for their child and how the program is organized.

Education of the child should be regarded as a partnership by parents and teacher. Both the home and school have important functions to serve in the education of the child. One cannot work effectively without the co-operation of the other. In order to see the whole child, to know how he reacts at home and at school and to develop the best program for the child, there must be dialogue between home and school. The one to gain most is, of course, the child.

Knowledge about child development has expanded so rapidly in recent years that the trained preschool teacher can provide an invaluable source of information to the parents. Parents know their child best and all parents are concerned and interested in their child. With the pooling of information, the teacher gets to know the children better and organizes the program to meet their needs.

Many parents are involved in education through working on school committees, curriculum committees and school boards. Others serve as volunteer aides, classroom assistants or native language instructors. Still others are involved in providing and arranging for the children's transportation. Many teachers make a point of accepting younger family members in the classroom and also ask the parents to come and visit at specific times for specific reasons. Holiday parties, displays of children's work and meetings to discuss the young child's progress are always well attended by the parents.

Casual contacts of parent and teacher at the school, on the street or at a social gathering make significant contributions to parent-teacher relationships by establishing *rapport* and

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a friendly relationship. Parent-teacher conferences, an essential part of every preschool program, are carried out in all schools. In some cases the parents go to the school, but in a few areas the teachers go to the home to meet the parents and take the report card with them.

At parent-teacher conferences the parents learn about the child's progress and the teacher learns about the parents' beliefs and procedures relative to working with the children. Keeping in mind the way a mother feels about sending her child to school has a profound effect on the way the child adjusts to the new situation. Parent-teacher conferences, classroom visits and casual conversation can do much to relieve the anxiety of the parent about preschool.

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Preschools are for Teachers

Loving children, enjoyment in working with children, patience, understanding, warmth and sensitivity are basic requirements for working with young children. Training and experience provide the skills in operating the program, but unless the teacher has the first requirements, she ought not to be in a preschool classroom.

Recognizing young children as imaginative, active, energetic individuals who are eager to learn, makes it necessary for the teacher to plan and prepare the environment so the child will learn in increasing depth through discovery and exploration. Meeting the intellectual, social, physical and emotional needs of the children will always be the basis for the selection of material, equipment and activities.

Methodical observation and study must be made of each child to assess the unique learning style and rate of speech development. Special abilities and interests; muscle co-ordination; social adjustment and the way children feel about themselves must also be carefully recorded.

There is no doubt that the teacher's greatest ally is the classroom assistant or aide. Planning together by teacher and assistants brings both professional expertise and pragmatic skills into the program planning. In many instances this is a genuine team-effort on the part of the professional and para-professional to meet the special needs of the children in the classroom.

The staff plan their program on the basis of sound educational philosophy, the length of the school day, the number and needs of the children, the physical facilities available and the attitude of the parents and community. A good program provides opportunities for social adjustment. It develops from the immediate environment of the children and allows plenty of time for them to express themselves through various media. It also allows the children to use their bodies and all five senses in learning. A good program should also utilize the past experiences of the children to develop new learning experiences for them. The interest and needs of the parents must also be considered.

The preschool program is a time for social interaction, for development of communication skills, for discovery and exploration. It is not a watered down Grade One nor a readiness time for Grade One through the use of workbook assignments, the teaching of reading, or number work. It is a time for developing the child's self-concept, for developing perceptual skills and a

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positive attitude towards school. It should also provide concrete experiences on which to base future learning.

Every teaching staff must assess and evaluate their program frequently to determine how effective their program is in developing the individual child. This evaluation indicates adaptations that may have to be made to meet specific needs. Is there a balance in type and place of program? Is there a choice of activities? Are new activities and situations provided to arouse the child's interests and meet his needs? Is there enough of the familiar routine to give the child security? Do the children have the opportunity to create and explore? Do they have time to plan and talk as a group?

While daily evaluations are necessary, so is evaluation in terms of long-range goals and objectives. These goals may have to be revised many times during the year as the teachers come to know more about the children, the parents and the community.

Assessment of the success of the program is based upon understanding what children mean when they speak, what changes occur in behaviour, and what problems are solved or attempted to be solved. Without record keeping such observation of growth and development can not be evaluated

Preschools are for the Community

Every community is concerned about the development of its children, for children are its hope for the future. The first year of school may determine the child's attitude toward all future schooling and may prevent or ensure academic success.

The attitude of the community toward preschool programs will hinder or assist, to a large degree, the success of any preschool program. Almost all communities give their approval to the nursery school and kindergarten programs on their reserve.

The teaching of a native language in some classrooms has brought a renewed interest in the native tongue in the homes. In some communities, the language spoken by grandparents, forgotten by parents, is being taught to, and used, by young children. In other communities where the native language is the mother tongue, the assistant or language teacher communicating with parents or children in their native tongue has made the parents feel the school is really their school and a centre of community life.

Local curriculum committees, already very active in Quebec and developing rapidly in other areas, meet to discuss and develop curricula relevant to the needs of Indian children. Such committees ensure that the past and the present are blended into a program which reflects the attitudes, values and interests of the parents and meets the expectations of the community.

In many communities local people, trained to work as aides, instruct their own band-operated classroom or language programs. They provide their communities with specialists in preschool education and are a knowledgeable source of information on what is going on in the classroom and what preschool is all about. The communities are better informed than they ever have been and community understanding of education has increased immeasurably as a result of this local participation.

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Training Programs for Preschool Workers

Native preschool workers are chosen by the local school committees or band councils in consultation with the Department. Most regions have training programs for preschool aides and instructors. Some variation exists in terms of course content, program length, and the ultimate goals of the training program.

Most programs include instruction in child development, child psychology, preschool curriculum areas, a practicum period, instruction in the native language, creative art, music, drama and first aid.

In Manitoba the five-year PENT (Primary Education for Native Teachers) program leads to teacher licensing under the provincial department of education.

British Columbia's training program also leads to a provincial licensing which allows the graduates to work in any private preschool or day care centre in the province. Most of the participants of this program are employed by their local bands to instruct the band-organized and-administered preschool program.

Saskatchewan has had a series of three courses which have trained teachers and assistants together. This innovative factor is very important as the interrelationship during training increases mutual understanding in the classroom.

The Maritimes, Quebec, Ontario and Alberta are in various stages of developing similar programs in co-operation with major universities.

Several very positive results have occurred with the use of local women in the preschool. Each community has a local specialist in the area of preschool education, so the liaison work and increased understanding between school and community has been remarkable; the children starting school have someone they know, understand and who speaks their language; and the teachers have been able to gain more understanding of the children with whom they work and the community in which they operate.

The value of local people working in the classroom cannot be underestimated in terms of advantages to the child, the teacher and the community.

Summary: Why Schools for Young Children?

There is a great deal of research to support the advantages of children attending nursery school and kindergarten. The first four or five years of a child's life are the period of most rapid growth in physical and mental characteristics. The child is most affected by environmental conditions during these years as attitudes and values are formed and as speech is developing. Benjamin Bloom[1] of the University of Chicago has estimated that:

"in terms of intelligence measured at age 17, about 50 per cent of the development takes place between conception and age 4, about 30 per cent between ages 4 and 8 and about 20 per cent between ages 8 and 17."

This emphasizes the great importance of the first few years of school and the influence the preschool can have in the development of learning patterns in terms of the child's later achievements.

The years in nursery school and kindergarten cannot replace learning in the home. They can, in fact, only supplement or complement the education which occurs there. Growth and development are aided by an accumulation of stimulating experiences which are satisfactory to the child. Teachers, parents and communities share the responsibility for the early education of all children.

In her book *The Critical Years*, Emmy Louise Widmer[5] outlines the value of the nursery school-kindergarten by stating:

It helps to promote and maintain the child's health and physical development

It provides an opportunity for further contact with other children and adults.

It provides an abundance of first hand experiences and a wide variety of equipment and materials to assist the child in living, thinking and learning.

The foundation of all future school learning is begun in the preschool through the types of experiences carefully selected and planned by the staff.

There is an opportunity for the child to expand language as a means of communication and expression.

The child's understanding of his social and scientific world is broadened.

There is provision for satisfying aesthetic experiences for the child.

The kindergarten program provides opportunities for the child to develop his sense of responsibility.

References

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Photo Locale

Cover Skidegate, B.C.
1 Fort George, P.Q.
2 Eskasoni, N.S.
3 Standoff, Alta.
4 Hobbema, Alta.
5 Whycocomagh, N.S.
6 St. Theresa Point, Man.
7 Whycocomagh, N.S.
8 Masset, B.C.
9 Hobbema Alta.
10 Whycocomagh, N.S.
11 Fort George, P.Q.
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55 Hodgson, Man.
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57 Walpole Island, Ont.

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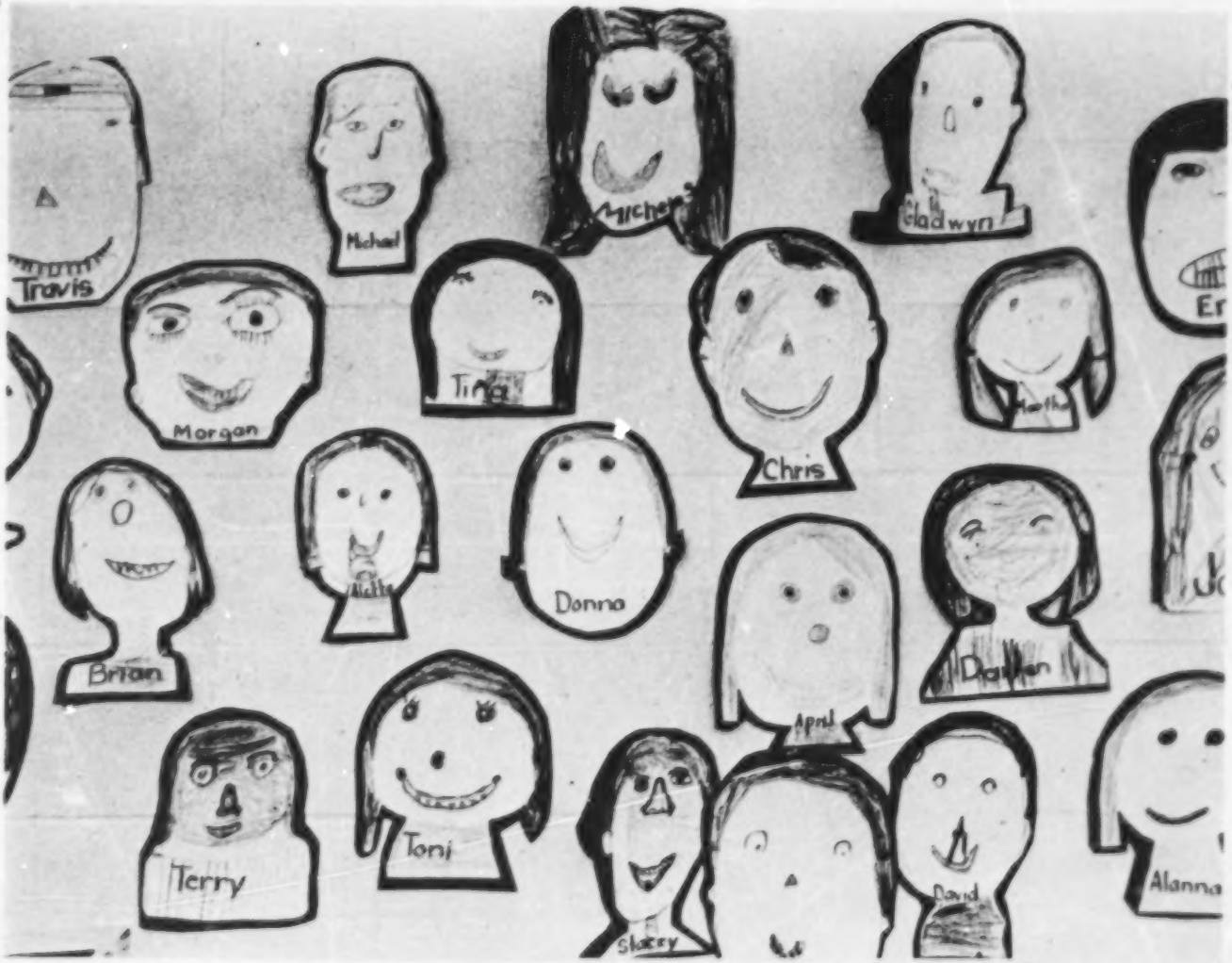
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